

**Memory Rose into Threshold Speech. The Collected Earlier Poetry: A Bilingual Edition. By Paul Celan, translated from the German by Pierre Joris. With Commentary by Pierre Joris and Barbara Wiedemann. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, first ebook edition 2020. eISBN 9780374719722**

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Last year, the literary world paid tribute to Paul Celan (1920-1970), a Romania-born Jewish poet, regarded as one of the most influential German-language authors of the twentieth century. New language editions marked the centenary of his birth, and at the same time, the fiftieth anniversary of Celan's death by suicide was remembered. Amongst the published series, the *Memory Rose into Threshold Speech* is seen as the ultimate anthology of Celan's earlier poetry. It is a revised bilingual edition of Celan's works from the post-war years through to 1963. Translated by Pierre Joris, the most respected Celanian scholar, the new edition provides an updated introduction and comprehensive commentary.

The purpose of this review is to focus on one poem from the new anthology and explore new reading of its meaning. The poem *Die Schleuse*, usually translated as *The Sluice*, was written in September 1960 and its metaphor has been challenging Celan's translators and readers ever since. The new reading and interpretation, posited in this review, may see this poem more relevant to the Holocaust theme than previously appreciated.

Celan was born Paul Antschel on 23 November 1920, an only child in German-speaking, fairly traditional Jewish family in Czernowitz, then the capital of Romanian province of Bukovina. The region, known for an intense Hasidic lifestyle in the neighbouring Galicia, had a multiethnic population with many languages spoken indiscriminately. The presence of ardent Jewish intellectuals and artists was still tolerated in this part of Europe, and the German language and culture played a vital role in the process of Jewish emancipation. A talented linguist, young Paul Celan was educated in German and knew Romanian, Hebrew, Yiddish and Russian before becoming fluent in French and learning English. In November 1938, Celan witnessed the pogroms of the *Kristallnacht* and he was with his parents when the Nazi Einsatzgruppen marched into Czernowitz in July 1941. Within a month, more than 3,000 Jews in Bukovina were murdered. Hundreds of others were deported and killed in concentration camps in Ukraine; among them in 1942, were Celan's parents. Celan himself survived almost two years of forced labour camps in Romania and returned to Czernowitz in 1944. He left his hometown in 1945, lived briefly in Bucharest and Vienna, seeking solace in writing poetry. Ultimately, Celan arrived in Paris in 1948, which remained his home until his death in April 1970.

Celan started to write poetry in 1939, the year Germany occupied Poland and the persecution of European Jews accelerated. Later, as an orphan

tormented by memories and survivor's guilt, Celan, a Jew, continued writing in German, but not without angst. German was the tongue of his mother and her love of German literature that inspired Celan early in life. German was the language of his mother's murderers, but in turn, the only language he trusted to communicate the truth. He had done so, writing *Todesfuge* (*Deathfuge*)<sup>1</sup> in May 1945. Poignantly, while 'May 1945' had a victorious connotation for millions of people, it was then when Celan heard about his parents' murder. *Todesfuge* was first published in 1947 and became one of the best known Holocaust poems once the outside world discovered survivors' accounts of the extermination camps horrors. In the poem, Celan himself a survivor, delivered the testimony of his parents' fate decades ahead of general awareness of the Shoah oral histories. *Todesfuge* evokes macabre imagery whether read in German or in an English translation. Notably though, Pierre Joris and John Felstiner left the central word *Deutschland* untranslated, thus underscoring its potency.<sup>2</sup> In the context of semantic capacity of a single word, we now turn to the poem under review, *Die Schleuse* (*The Sluice*). Three questions will be considered: when the word *Die Schleuse* entered Celan's vocabulary, is it a metaphor and is it translatable?

In the years following his arrival in Paris, Celan was traumatised by false accusations of plagiarism. He was also adversely affected by a prestigious German literary award he received in 1960. Then, separation from his wife and son triggered Celan's psychiatric episodes and hospitalization. These are known events often cited in commentaries interpreting Celan's poetry of the period. Yet, there may have been other forces. As for many Holocaust survivors, time did little to erase the memory. To the contrary - in May 1960 the world heard about the arrest of Adolf Eichmann. The name synonymous with mass killings and death camps must have sent shivers across Europe. Besides, Celan was part of a circle of Jewish artists corresponding between Paris, Prague, Berlin, and Stockholm. Among them were those who survived *Terezín*, a concentration camp north of Prague known as Theresienstadt, where the Nazis deported Jews from occupied Europe before transporting them further East, to almost certain death in Auschwitz. It seems highly possible that from his friends, such as Czech Erich Einhorn and French Robert Desnos, Celan would have heard the word *die Schleuse* and internalized its *Terezín* meaning as its own expression of darkness and suffering.

First, *die Schleuse*<sup>3</sup> was German term given to the large barracks in *Terezín* where the prisoners delousing took place on an industrial scale, where families were separated and fates decided. The prisoners soon learned that to report to *die Schleuse* meant an order to join a transport to the East. The word filled them with despair. It signified both the inhuman conditions on their arrival in *Terezín* and mortal fear when departing to Auschwitz. *Die Schleuse* or *Šlojska* (shlojska, a word coined in Czech), has been recorded in many survivors' testimonies and visual artworks. Was *die Schleuse* a metaphor?

Not necessarily to the Nazis when they used it as a technical term for an industrial mechanism facilitating the processing of a large flow of human lives. To the *Terezín* inmates, however, *die Schleuse* equated to the ‘gates to hell’ whether arriving in *Terezín* or departing *Terezín* to Auschwitz.

The final challenge of this review is to channel the background knowledge into reading *Die Schleuse* anew:

<b>Die Schleuse</b>	<b>The Sluice</b>
Paul Celan, September 1960	Translated by Pierre Joris, 2020
Über aller dieser deiner Trauer: kein zweiter Himmel. ..... An einen Mund, dem es ein Tausendwort war, verlor – verlor ich ein Wort, das mir verblieben war: Schwester.	Above all this grief of yours: no second heaven. ..... To a mouth, for which it was a thousandword, I lost-- I lost a word that remained with me: sister.
An die Vielgötterei verlor ich ein Wort, das mich suchte: <i>Kaddisch</i> .	To the many gods I lost a word, that searched for me: <i>Kaddish</i> .
Durch die Schleuse mußst ich, das Wort in die Salzflut zurück- und hinaus- und hinüberzuretten: <i>Jiskor</i> .	Through the sluice I had to go, so as to save the word, back to and across and over the saltflood: <i>Yizkor</i> .

Essentially, in all known English editions published to date, the poem’s title, and the forth stanza, read as the allegorical *sluice* built to regulate vast waterways in Sweden. It has been documented that Celan’s stressful visit to his ill friend in Stockholm, and surrounding life events in Paris, preceded the poem (pp. 62-3). Others have read the verses as Celan’s abandoning Judaism or volatility of his language to express the truth.<sup>4</sup> Whereas this review does not contest earlier interpretations of the poem, it aspires to offer an additional semantic dimension. The tragic pages of Celan’s life, utterances during 1960 and the poet’s own secular Jewish presence during the Holocaust years may have opened old wounds. It is imaginable that for Celan, over the ensuing decade, the value of his life *per se* morphed into *Die Schleuse* of *Terezín*. There was no hiding behind a metaphor, and as such, perhaps, the

word *Die Schleuse* is best left untranslated. The magnitude of sorrow inherent in *Die Schleuse* equals to reciting the *Kaddish* (Mourning prayer) and *Yizkor* (Remember) during the *Yom HaShoah*, Holocaust Remembrance Day, two words voiced in Celan’s poem in transliterated Hebrew.

Approaching the *Yom HaShoah* in late April 1970, Paul Celan, reportedly an able swimmer, walked into the waters of the Seine. ‘Through *die Schleuse* I had to go’... *Yizkor*. The Holocaust destroyed Celan’s Czernowitz and decimated European Jewish and Yiddish culture. In return, Celan left us with two Holocaust testimonies, the first *Todesfuge* framed by the immediacy of his parents’ death, and the last, *Die Schleuse*, defined by a decade of the unbearable burden of a survivor’s remembering.



*Schleusse* [sic], Leo Löwit 1942, Theresienstadt, Watercolour and ink on card, 18.2 x 12.5 cm. Kindly donated by Mrs Regina Schwarz, Jewish Museum of Australia Collection 295.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For German original and English translation by Pierre Joris, 2020, see <https://poets.org/poem/death-fugue>.

<sup>2</sup> John Felstiner (1936-2017) was Paul Celan's translator and biographer. Compare with translation by Michael Hamburger <https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/death-fugue>.

<sup>3</sup> *Die Schleuse* stands for a closed room for disinfection or a mechanism for regulation of large amount of moving water; for more details see <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/german-english/schleuse?q=Schleuse>.

<sup>4</sup> Esther Cameron, *Western Art and Jewish Presence in the Work of Paul Celan, Roots and Ramifications of the 'Meridian' Speech* (Lexington Books, 2014), 127. See also Eric Klingerman, *Sites of the uncanny: Paul Celan, specularity and the visual arts* (Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 132-134.